



## Testimony Submitted to Members of the General Assembly

February 18, 2010

Sheryl Breetz, North Central Regional Mental Health Board

Distinguished Co-Chairs and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

North Central Regional Mental Health Board, as mandated by state statutes, conducts independent evaluations of services provided by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and involves the people who use services, their families, and concerned citizens in continuously evaluating the results of DMHAS funded services and recommending improvements. Regional Mental Health Boards carry out evaluations through hundreds of volunteers in the State.

We support the proposed funding for DMHAS services. We can attest that the vision within DMHAS leadership is clear and important for our State: to improve the mental health and lives of Connecticut citizens with mental illness. This goal is essential because major mental illness affects all aspects of peoples' lives. Moreover, we see increasing numbers of people who have regained a meaningful life with effective supports. For example, for the past two years NCRMHB has conducted an interview project with interviewers who have experienced major mental illness in their own lives, many of whom were told they would never work again. The results of their "A Day in the Life" project will soon appear in the professional journal, *Psychiatry*. We saw, first hand, the enormous abilities, confidence, and life changing effects that having meaningful work provided these consumers. In fact, one interviewer, after 18 years of hospitalization, has entered a school of nursing and has all "A's" in his first semester.

However, from their intensive interviews with people in the DMHAS system, we also know that the challenges are greater than even imagined for many individuals and their families. Many people felt stuck in their lives and extremely distressed by the lives of poverty and inability to reach any meaningful goal in their life. We applaud DMHAS for focusing their services on improving the lives of people in the community, but we are concerned that many of the bills before the General Assembly regarding medication co-pays and other such measures would even deepen their poverty and distress. Quotes from many of the people we interviewed will be running in a video loop in the LOB concourse the week of March 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>, and we hope that you can stop by to hear what people told us about their lives and the kind of help they need. Many of those interviewed identified low cost, common sense, supports that have made a difference in their lives.

We recognize that most of the individuals who are struggling to recover from mental illness began that struggle in late adolescence or young adulthood. We applaud members of the General Assembly for supporting the creation of DMHAS Young Adult Services in 2000. We ask you to support the increased funding proposed for Young Adult Services to serve the increasing numbers of young adults coming into the DMHAS system for help and the life changing impact effective services can have for them.

The National Conference of State Legislatures' September 2006 Policy Brief concluded that "failing to help youth successfully transition to adulthood can be costly to individuals and governments in the long run." We recognize that increased funding for young adults will yield great returns and represent wise management for the State even in times of fiscal challenge. Before Young Adult Services were developed ten years ago, this age group was virtually absent from DMHAS services. In ten short years referrals increased 4500%, and DMHAS has continued to improve these new services and receive national recognition for their achievements. The latest evaluation of these services by the State's Regional Mental Health Boards highlighted the program's achievements and found DMHAS directors and providers eager to continuously improve their services.

The structure of Regional Mental Health Boards and openness of DMHAS administration and service providers in welcoming evaluations of their services by those who use and depend on those services is unique in State government. We applaud DMHAS for seeking transparency and involvement of consumers and family members. This year Regional Mental Health Boards joined with Advocacy Unlimited, NAMI-CT, and FAVOR to involve unprecedented numbers of consumers, youth, and family members in identifying the quality of care they need and in assessing their care. Consumer and family involvement is a powerful tool. The project is named the Consumer, Youth, and Family Continuous Quality Improvement Collaboration (or QuIC, for short).

In summary, we support the DMHAS vision of improving the lives of Connecticut citizens who have serious mental illness, continued building of Young Adult Services to help young adults receive effective services at the peak years for developing a mental illness, and their efforts to focus on clear real life results and transparency through involvement of people who use services and their families. This is a responsible use of hard earned taxpayer money, and we ask your support.

Thank you,

**Sheryl L. Breetz**

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... to ensure that citizens are involved in determining and monitoring the kind of mental health services provided in Connecticut.